

Formalizing the Marine Corps Advisor Billet

Captain AE Zinni

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Personal Anecdote

In early 2005, the new Afghan government was still struggling to establish itself. Its evolution adversely affected the Afghan armed forces in many ways. At that time, the writer was a military advisor to the 2d Company, Commando Kandek, of the Afghan Army. During that period, the company received its first payday from the Afghan government. This payday was particularly important for the troops since it would include several months back pay owed to them while they were deployed on combat operations. The soldiers were already upset and frustrated because the payday was late by several weeks, and they had hoped they could send the money to their families while on post deployment leave.

However, their frustration turned to anger as they realized that their pay no longer included the combat pay they had expected. They received no adequate answers from their government as to why combat pay was excluded and quickly turned to the U.S. advisory team for answers and help. They could not understand how the U.S. could let this happen and why the Americans turned the control of their pay over to their government. Clearly, the Afghanis did not trust their government and wanted the U.S. to continue to pay them.

As the writer supervised payday at the company office, he was surrounded by over twenty angry soldiers who demanded assistance. In addition to the pay problems, the soldiers were not being adequately fed by the Afghan army since it had taken over this responsibility as well. The troops were calmed down, and the U.S. ultimately intervened to resolve these serious problems and a number of other issues caused by their government. However, such lapses clearly affected morale, training, and combat proficiency. These problems and events occurred during the author's first week as an advisor and team leader for 2d company.

Most advisors are not prepared to deal with such issues; few possess the unique skill set required: In depth proficiency in foreign language and an understanding of host nation culture and of U.S. interests, foreign weapons familiarization, and the ability to advise and train foreign personnel. In fact, the billets of the current military advisors should be placed in a formal organization under a supplementary military occupational specialty and provided in depth training, in language, culture, and weaponry under a formal program because of current and future demands.

Background

When one thinks of military advisors, images of the Vietnam War and Marine advisors like Colonel John W. Ripley and his heroic actions at the bridge of Dong Ha appear as do the successes in advising and training the South Vietnamese Marine Corps. The Marine advisory unit created during the Vietnam War was a unique organization carefully structured from its inception, and the advisors received extensive training at the U.S. Army Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, before deploying. The advisory course there was a formal program specifically designed to educate and train American officers to advise and train foreign forces. Many skills and lessons from Vietnam, however, were lost, and the U.S. is only slowly relearning them today.

Current Short-Term Need

The U.S. is in an era of conflicts requiring stabilization and reconstruction missions that will continue into the near future. Allied forces and newly created forces in recovering, failed, or incapable states rebuilding their security forces will require significant advisory efforts to be effective. Military advisors and trainers provide the necessary support needed in stabilizing troubled areas of the world by developing

capable security forces that can effectively handle the complex threats they face. Additionally, advisors help improve relationships between the United States Armed Forces and other foreign militaries and enhance coalition operations with those forces. In fact, military advisors are crucial to today's fight in the war on terrorism. During a personal interview, retired Marine Corps General Anthony C. Zinni, a former military advisor from the Vietnam era and a former commander of U.S. Central Command, stated his belief that a need exists now, more than ever, for well-trained military advisors abroad and that the requirement will continue well into the future.¹

Incredibly, the Marine Corps has handed off training advisors to adhoc units from the Marine expeditionary forces (MEFs). The current organization is temporary and not designed to be a long-term solution: The Marine Corps appears to assume that the advisor organization is likely to dissolve once operations in Afghanistan and Iraq draw to a close. Such short-sightedness will doom the U.S. to lose valuable experience and lessons learned and to repeat the same mistakes as it did after Vietnam. Currently, units are tasked with providing Marines to fill these billets and do not always send qualified individuals. Some argue that

¹ (Ret) General Anthony C. Zinni, interview by author, December 5, 2008.

units treat advisor billets like the Fleet Assistance Program (FAP) and therefore, send average Marines at best.

Proposed Long-Term Need

Military advisors and trainers will still be required long after operations in Afghanistan and Iraq end. During a Foreign Military Advisor Conference held in October 2006 by the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned (MCCLL), almost all agreed that a long term solution was needed:

There was a need to establish a long term, formalized transition team advisor program. Conference participants expressed strongly the view that to be successful, such a program should be responsible for the whole range of advisor issues: screening, selection of members, training, equipment, deployment, employment, sustaining advisor teams and supervising advisor activities between deployments. Conference participants also stated that the sourcing and training of advisors needs to be centralized under one command. Passing the sourcing requirement between the MEFs on a rotational basis provided inconsistent quality in the teams.²

General Zinni identified the need for a long-term commitment by stating, valuable skills learned in advisory tours could be used in security assistance program billets or in mobile training team assignments.³

Language Skills

² Marine Corps Lessons Learned, Foreign Military Advisor Conference 24-26 October 2006, (Lessons and Observations from Transition Teams OIF 05-07 and OEF VI, 19 January 2007) 8.

³ General Anthony C. Zinni, Interview.

A military advisor should possess a basic understanding of the local language of the area to which the advisors will deploy. Knowing the language to a reasonable level is important. It helps foster better working relationships with foreign counterparts and the local populace. Learning takes time, however. A former advisor in Iraq said, "All of the training and know-how in the world will serve the advisor no purpose if he cannot build a relationship with his counterpart. Without a good language base that is impossible."⁴

Culturally Savvy

A military advisor should also have a solid grasp of the culture within his area of operations. Understanding local culture helps an advisor to develop relationships and to understand the dynamic around him. In an interview, General Zinni explained that his training at Fort Bragg involved Vietnamese families contracted by the Army to train them on language, customs, culture, and village life. He explained that the training definitely prepared him when he arrived in Vietnam.⁵ Several after action reports from advisors in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, complained that

⁴ 1st Lt. Brett A Friedman. "Training in Transition," Marine Corps Gazette. Quantico: Vol.92, Iss. 6 (Jun 2008): 34.

⁵ General Anthony C. Zinni, Interview.

the culture training they received was very basic and had very little value: They needed more specific information to their area of operations.⁶

Weapons and People Savvy

Foreign weapons employment, assembly/disassembly, and repair are important as well, and an advisor will often be called upon to perform or instruct locals in these tasks. For example, the writer had to instruct the ANA on the Dshka(12.7mm) heavy machine gun and to repair an RPG-7. Additionally, he assisted the soldiers BZO of their AK-47 and with firing their mortars. Moreover, advisors must be able to inspect weapons for functionality to ensure they do not pose a danger when fired. Commonly, U.S. trained indigenous forces will use seized weapons and ammunition to arm and re-supply themselves; in many cases the condition of this equipment is questionable.

An understanding of the tactics and operational organization of the local forces is also necessary to provide the advice needed and to coordinate missions with U.S. and other coalition forces. General Zinni also felt that the instruction on the history of the conflict was a

⁶ Marine Corps Lessons Learned, Foreign Military Advisor Conference 24-26 October 2006. 16

critical component to his preparation and training prior to his advisor tour.⁷

Formal Organization and Secondary MOS

Having a permanent organization will ensure the U.S. selects the right people and provides the in-depth training necessary to prepare for the complex and difficult assignment of advising foreign forces. "The Marine Corps must appropriately screen Marines for required skill sets before assignment."⁸ Not everyone is suited for this duty and assigning someone who is ill-suited is not only counter productive to the overall effort but can also greatly hinder mission effectiveness. A strong consensus exists that a screening system for this assignment is necessary. "Individuals needed to be screened for maturity, ability to work independently with minimal supervision, willingness to work with Iraqis and Afghans, MOS proficiency, patience, flexibility and resourcefulness, and the ability to teach and conduct training."⁹ Again, a permanent organization will allow for a continuous level experience within the staff of instructors to resonate and would properly screen and train military advisors. Additionally, advisors will also have

⁷ General Anthony C. Zinni, Interview.

⁸ Capt. Brian G. Cillessen "Marine Advisors," Marine Corps Gazette. Quantico: Web Article (Feb 2007): 34.

more time in this B billet to train properly, become more experienced, and be more effective when operating abroad.

Counterarguments

Some may feel that creating an additional MOS will be too difficult and that the new MOS will pull away from the total force structure in the Marine Corps. However, in the near future, the Marine Corps will increase its total strength to 202K. The new advisor MOS could represent a new billet that would be filled from the troop increase, allowing for the additional manpower needed to create a permanent organization and meet its staffing requirement.

Others may argue that a new MOS could affect promotions if Marines miss opportunities for command and primary MOS proficiency. In a recent MARADMIN, the Commandant of the Marine Corps stated that all Marines who serve as advisors in a comparable billet will be looked at equally for promotion and command. He certainly sees the value in the advisory assignments. A secondary MOS could lead to follow up tours in security assistance programs and in joint and combined commands and staffs. Beyond a B billet, this MOS would also allow for career progression for those with regional expertise and experience if linked

⁹ Marine Corps Lessons Learned, Transition Team Conferences: I, II, and III MEF November and December 2007, (Lessons and Observations from OEF and OIF, 9 April 2008) 5.

to the Foreign Area Officer Program (with assignments such as attaché billets). Additionally, this MOS will produce a number of subject matter experts for the Marine Corps in many areas of the world in which the Corps operates.

Conclusion

Current military advisors must be placed under a formal organization and training program (with an assigned secondary MO) because of the billet's demanding requirements. Today's fight requires skilled military advisors more than ever. Advisors will help shape foreign relationships in the future and ensure local hosts that the burden will be shared in fighting common enemies.

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